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AUTHOR Young, Richard F.
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ABSTRACT

One of the ways in which language testing interfaces with applied linguistics is in the definition and validation of the constructs that underlie language tests. When language testers and score users interpret scores on a test, they do so by implicit and explicit reference to the construct on which the test is based. Equally, when applied to new understandings of the way people use language, the challenge for language testers is to develop tests that embody these new understandings. This paper puts forward a relatively new theory of spoken language use in face-to-face communication--"interactional competence"--and discusses the implications of the theory for the design and interpretation of tests of oral communication. The theory of interactional competence seeks to explain the variation in an individual speaker's performance from one discursive practice to another. It is concluded that in validly assessing interactional competence, close attention must be paid to exactly what happens during performance assessments so that it is known exactly what configuration of interactional resources apply to the practice of assessment. It is also concluded that such testing provides a principled way of generalizing from performance in the discursive practice of a performance assessment to performance in other non-test contexts. Second language acquisition researchers must pay careful attention to the contexts in which they elicit interlanguage data. (Contains 32 references.) (KFT)

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Interactional Competence:

Challenges for Validity

Richard F. Young

University of Wisconsin-Madison

rfyoung@facstaff.wisc.edu

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Theories of validity

One of the ways in which language testing interfaces with applied linguistics is in the definition and validation of the constructs that underlie language tests. When language testers and score users interpret scores on a test, they do so by implicit or explicit reference to the construct on which the test is based. Equally, when applied linguists come to new understandings of the way people use language, the challenge for language testers is to develop tests that embody those new understandings. In my contribution to today's colloquium, I want to put forward a relatively new theory of spoken language use in face-to-face communication – which I call interactional competence – and to discuss the implications of the theory for the design and interpretation of tests of oral communication.

The focus of interactional competence is on the structure of recurring episodes of face-to-face interaction in context, episodes that are of social and cultural significance to a community of speakers. Such episodes have been called interactive practices by Hall (1995), communicative practices by Hanks (1996), and share similarities with the speech events described by Hymes (1974). Linguistic anthropologists (e.g., University of Hawai'i Department of Anthropology, No date) have referred to these episodes as *discursive practices*, and this is the term that I will use to refer to them. A discursive practice approach to language-in-interaction takes a view of social realities as interactionally constructed rather than existing independently of interaction, of meanings as negotiated through interaction rather than fixed in advance of interaction, of the context-bound nature of discourse, and of discourse as social action.

The assessment of interactional competence in specific discursive practices is challenging because from performance on a test of interactional competence, we wish to infer both a behavior that is specific to a given discursive practice as well as a characteristic of the person who takes the test. However, interactional competence is an illuminating and useful theory for language testers because it is a theory that allows us to make principled comparisons between one context of interaction and another.

Before I define the construct of interactional competence and discuss ways in which to validate tests of interactional competence, it is necessary to review what kind of relationships hold between tests results and the construct underlying a test. The general shape of this relationship was laid out in several insightful articles by Sam Messick (1989, 1996), and has been revisited in a recent paper by Chapelle (1998).

Chapelle distinguishes among three perspectives on construct definition: a construct may be defined as a trait, as a behavior, or as some combination of trait and behavior. In a trait definition of a construct, consistent performance of a person on a test is related in a principled way to the person's knowledge and speech production processes. That is to say, a person's consistent performance on a test is taken to be a sign of a fairly stable configuration of knowledge and skills that the person carries around with them – and which that person can apply in all contexts. In contrast, in a definition of a construct as a behavior, the consistent performance of a person on a test is related in a principled way to the context in which the behavior is observed. That is to say, test performance is assumed to say something about an individual's performance on a specific task or in a specific context, but *not* on other tasks or in other contexts – unless these can be shown to be related to the task or context that was tested.

The contrast between trait and behaviorist definitions of a construct appears most obvious when multiple-choice grammar items designed to test linguistic competence are contrasted with open-ended performance assessments designed to test integration of multiple skills and knowledge in the performance of a complex task. In a trait definition of the construct of linguistic competence underlying a test composed of multiple-choice items, a person's performance on these items is taken to indicate knowledge of grammar that the same person can apply in all situations. On the other hand, in a behaviorist definition of a construct such as essay writing underlying a performance test, an essay written by an individual writer is taken to indicate the performance of the same individual on that and other similar essay tasks. But it does not provide prima facie evidence of how the same individual might perform on other tasks – unless those tasks are related by a theory to the essay task.

Clearly, neither trait not behaviorist definitions are satisfactory for theories of language in use, such as communicative competence, because, as Bachman (1990, p. 84) has emphasized, communicative language ability consists of both knowledge *and* "the capacity for implementing, or executing that competence" in specific contexts of use. For this reason, it is desirable to consider the third of Messick and Chapelle's definitions of a construct, which they refer to as the interactionalist definition. In an interactionalist validation of a test, a person's performance on the test is taken to indicate an underlying trait characteristic of that person and, at the same time, the performance is also taken to indicate the influence of the context (i.e., the task or situation) in which the performance occurs. The interactionalist definition is, in other words, a way to have your cake and eat it: to infer from test performance something about *both* a practice-specific behavior *and* a

practice-independent, person-specific trait. Moreover, the interactionalist definition of a construct refers not only to the trait and the context, but also to some theory of how the two interact. In Bachman's (1990) model of communicative language ability, for example, traits interact with contexts by means of an individual's general strategic competence, a means that is, that a person has of assessing a situation as of one kind rather than another, of planning appropriate responses to the situation, and of executing the plans with a sensitivity to the shifting dynamics of the context.

However, if interactionalist and behaviorist approaches to construct definition are to allow test users to generalize from behavior in one context to another, that is, from the context of the performance elicited in the test to other non-test contexts, then what is needed is a theory that relates one context to another in a principled way. This is precisely the strength of the discursive practice approach to interactional competence, which I will outline in the second part of this paper.

Interactional competence

The theory of interactional competence seeks to explain the variation in an individual speaker's performance from one discursive practice to another. It comprises a descriptive framework of the socio-cultural characteristics of discursive practices and the interactional processes by which discursive practices are co-constructed by participants. The theory may perhaps best be understood by contrasting it with Canale and Swain's (1980) theory of communicative competence. Communicative competence characterizes a learner's competence in a language in terms of linguistic, pragmatic, discourse, and strategic competence and provides a rich view of the knowledge and skills that an

individual speaker needs to command in order to communicate accurately, appropriately, and effectively in a second language.

The focus of communicative competence, however, is on an individual language user in a social context; that is, the framework helps us to understand what an individual needs to know and to do in order to communicate. Such exclusive focus on a single individual's contribution to communication should, I believe, be problematized in view of current research that has advanced the position that abilities, actions, and activities do not belong to the individual but are *jointly* constructed by *all* participants (Jacoby & Ochs, 1995).

This constructivist, practice-oriented view of interaction and competence has been articulated by various applied linguists under different names. It was first put forward by Kramsch (1986), who referred to it as *interactional competence*. Interactional competence, as it has been developed since then, may be characterized by four features. First, it is concerned with language used in specific discursive practices rather than on language ability independent of context. Second, it is characterized by a focus on the co-construction of discursive practices by *all* participants involved rather than on a single person. Third, the theory describes a set of general interactional resources that participants draw upon in specific ways in order to co-construct a discursive practice. And fourth, the investigation of a given discursive practice consists, first, in identifying the particular configuration of resources that form an interactional architecture of that practice and, then, comparing the architecture of that practice with others in order to discover what resources are local to that practice and to what extent the practice shares a configuration of resources with other practices.

Some of the practices that have been described so far within this framework are ITA office hours (Young, 1997), and ESL writing conferences (Nguyen, 2000). These discursive practices are co-constructed by participants, each of whom contributes linguistic and pragmatic resources to the practice. Among others, participants bring the following six resources to a given practice: a knowledge of rhetorical scripts, a knowledge of register (i.e., lexical and syntactic structures and semantic relations specific to the practice), a knowledge of how to take turns-at-talk, a knowledge of topical organization, a knowledge of appropriate ways of participating in the practice, and a knowledge of the means for signaling boundaries between practices and transitions within the practice itself. The configuration of these resources constitutes an architecture of the practice.

Interactional resources

A few examples will show the kinds of resources that participants bring to different practices and how the configuration of resources differs from one practice to another. First, participants bring knowledge of what Ranney (1992) has called *rhetorical scripts*, or sequences of speech acts that help to define a particular discursive practice. For example, He (1993) has shown that students distinguish between acceptable and non-acceptable peer reviews of their written work by whether certain obligatory acts are present in a certain sequence in the reviews.

Second, participants may construct a practice with a *specific register*, by which I mean specific lexical and syntactic structures and semantic relations that characterize the practice. For example, in their analysis of conversations among physicians in a pediatric

intensive-care unit, Prince, Frader, and Bosk (1982) noted a high frequency of hedging – using a word or phrase such as "I think" or "sort of" whose job is to make things fuzzier.

Third, different discursive practices involve different *strategies for taking turns*. Research that I and others have done on the discourse of language proficiency interviews (LPIs) has shown that a characteristic of LPIs is an asymmetrical turn-taking system in which the interviewer can claim a turn at any time and also has the right to allocate a turn to the interviewee by means of questions and other turn-allocation devices. In LPIs, turns are allocated in a very similar way to the way turn taking is managed in classrooms (Young, 1995a; Young & Milanovic, 1992). However, this turn-taking system is very different from turn-taking patterns in ordinary conversations among peers, where no single individual has the exclusive right to allocate turns and there may be much competition for the floor.

Fourth, the *management of topics* differs in different discursive practices. Topic management includes preferences for certain topics over others and decisions as to who has the right to introduce a given topic, how long a topic persists in discourse, and who has the right to change the topic. A simple example of differences in topic management in different discursive practices comes from a comparison of conversations between couples in intimate relationships (Crow, 1983) and conversations in language proficiency interviews. Crow found that the couples in his study shifted the conversational topic on average every 48 seconds. In contrast, in certain kinds of language proficiency interviews, Young (1995b) found that topic shifts were far less frequent: In intermediate level interviews participants shifted turns on average every 67 seconds and in advanced level interviews, they shifted every 84 seconds.

Fifth, Goffman (1981), Goodwin (1990), and Philips (1972) have all drawn attention to the different ways in which participants in a practice take roles and ratify the roles of others. According to Goffman (1981), *participation in interaction* is not simply a matter of being either a speaker or hearer; rather it is the ways in which a speaker constructs him or herself as an animator, author, or principal of the words being spoken. Participation patterns also refer to whether people co-present in the interaction are ratified by the speakers as hearers or overhearers and how speakers design their talk in view of the recipient for which it is intended. The importance of understanding the patterns of participation in educational practice was shown by Philips (1972), who contrasted participation structures in a Native American classroom with those in the community beyond the school. She attributed the poor performance of Native American children in school to their lack of familiarity with participation patterns in the school. Tarone and Liu (1995) also demonstrated that some kinds of participation patterns that a child ESL learner engages in encourage faster and more complete development of features of his interlanguage than other kinds of interaction. A similar finding was reported by Shea, (1994), who compared interactions between Japanese students studying at an American university and four different interlocutors. Shea reported that the Japanese students appeared more proficient in English in conversations where they had equal access to the floor and in which they took perspectives that were congruent with those taken by their interlocutor.

Finally, the means for *signaling the boundaries* of a discursive practice may differ from one practice to another and transfer of an inappropriate boundary strategy may result in miscommunication. For example, Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1992) have

shown that the ways closings are managed in academic advising sessions between a professor and a student differ quite markedly from the ways closings have been described in mundane conversations by Schegloff and Sacks (1975). Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig show that in closing academic advising sessions, it is not legitimate to reinvoke topics that have already been dealt with during the session, whereas in closing mundane conversations, reinvocations are used to indicate that none of the participants has any further new topics to introduce.

Participants, then, bring to a discursive practice at least these six resources: a knowledge of rhetorical scripts, a knowledge of register specific to the practice, a knowledge of patterns of turn-taking, a knowledge of topical organization, a knowledge of an appropriate participation framework, and a knowledge of the means for signaling boundaries between practices and transitions within the practice itself.

Interactional competence, as I have described it, differs from communicative competence in several respects. In one respect, interactional competence is a further elaboration of second language knowledge; in other words, to discourse, pragmatic, and strategic competence, we must now add competence in (at least) the six interactional features that I have just described. However, in another respect, interactional competence is fundamentally different from communicative competence. Whereas communicative competence has been interpreted in much of the testing literature as a trait or bundle of traits that can be assessed in an individual, interactional competence is co-constructed by all participants in a discursive practice and is specific to that practice. That is, interactional competence starts from the view that participants' knowledge and

interactional skills are *local*: They apply to a given discursive practice and either do not apply or apply in a different configuration to different practices.

Assessing interactional competence: Challenges for validity

What are the implications of the theory of interactional competence for language testing? Interactional competence is unlike theories of individual cognition with which language testers are familiar (such as, for example, Skehan's (1998) theory of the relationship between an individual's cognitive processing and the nature of the task that s/he is performing) in that, first of all it is a theory of practice rather than a theory of what goes on inside the mind-brain of a single individual. And second, the knowledge and skills that are described by the theory are distributed among *all* participants in a discursive practice and it thus answers directly the conundrum of modern performance assessment that McNamara (1997) posed in the title of his article: "'Interaction' in second language performance assessment: Whose performance?"

Interactional competence is defined as specific to a discursive practice and distributed among all participants to the practice. If we take interactional competence as a construct that informs our validations of performance assessment, then the meaning of consistent performance on a test of oral communication is the response to the testing practice by all participants in the test – in Messick's and Chapelle's terms it is a behavioral construct rather than a trait. As such, it has two very important implications for language testing.

The first is that we must pay close attention to exactly what happens during performance assessments so that we know exactly what configuration of interactional resources apply to the practice of assessment. This is not the same as designing tests in

order to elicit particular features of interaction because we know from studies of interaction in oral tests that the practice of interaction in, say, an oral interview is very different from the construct that the test designers intend (Johnson & Tyler, 1998). Interactional competence invites us to view a performance assessment as a discursive practice and, thus, to investigate the configuration of interactional resources that participants bring to it.

The second implication of interactional competence for language testing is that it provides us with a principled way of generalizing from performance in the discursive practice of a performance assessment to performance in other non-test contexts. Interactional competence is local; that is to say, a given discursive practice is characterized by a specific configuration of interactional resources. But this does not mean that every discursive practice is *sui generis*. In fact different practices may share certain resources but show different configurations of others. For example, work that Young (1997) has done in comparing office hours carried out by international teaching assistants in different departments at a U.S. university has shown similar rhetorical scripts, similar strategies for managing of turns, similar participation frameworks, and similar ways of signaling boundaries and transitions in office hours in departments as different as math and foreign languages. What differs from department to department is the topical organization of the interaction and, not surprisingly, the specific lexis and syntactic patterns that occur most frequently in the interaction.

It is therefore possible to generalize from one performance assessment to performance in different contexts, but first we have to do the empirical work of finding

out the interactional architecture of our performance assessment and comparing it with the architecture of other discursive practices.

To conclude, over twenty years ago, Tarone (1979) enjoined second language acquisition researchers to pay careful attention to the contexts in which they elicit interlanguage data. More recently, Tarone (1998) enjoined language testers to do the same. In this paper, I can only underline the importance of Tarone's proposal. Language use in context is a chameleon that changes its color from one context to another. Interactional competence provides a way of comparing contexts and explaining the relationship between the contexts and the color of the chameleon's skin.

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